

HEADQUARTERS  
47TH TANK BATTALION  
APO 446 U.S. ARMY

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The accompanying story of Hatten was written as part of the history of the 47th Tank Battalion. Similar stories will be compiled of future engagements in which the battalion may take part. These stories will be distributed to you so that you may have a more complete understanding of the operations of the battalion as a whole. They--like this one--will be censored so that you may send them home. If you wish to keep them, you can thus compile a history of the battalion in combat.

The limitations of the space made it impossible to include the names of all the men of the battalion who served bravely and faithfully at Hatten. And, as the article says, to get the complete picture, each of your stories would have to be written. The rules of censorship make it impossible to mention the names of men killed, injured or missing. You all know their names, however, and I am sure you will not soon forget them.

In closing, I wish to extend to you my thanks for the way you have worked and fought. I am proud of the 47th, as I know you are; and I hope that we may all one day read this article with the remembrance that we served honorably in an honorable battalion.

signed: JAMES W. LANN  
Lt. Col. 47th Tank Battalion  
Commanding



Sixteen miles due north of Strasbourg-on-the-Rhine lies Haguenau and above Haguenau lies the Forest. Now, in the winter, the woods stand black and always wet with cold; and on the north edge of the Haguenau Forest, ten miles northeast of the city, stands the village of Hatten. Or what is left of bloody Hatten.

Anzio was longer than Hatten, the infantry men will tell you who dug in on that miserable beachhead for week after shell-shocked week; but for sheer bloody vicious tenseness, hour after hour and day after day, Hatten was the worst.

The Kraut was in the house next door, and the Kraut was in the houses across the street (more than once he was in the cellar while you were upstairs) and the Kraut was on the hills north of the town.

When you moved, he fired with burp guns; and if you moved again, he fired a bazooka; and if you still could move, he called in corps artillery and registered in on you from the hills. It made no difference. If you were a lone man, he would open up with mortars; and if you moved a tank, he called in bazookas by the squad, mortars, tanks, and anti-tank guns--and the artillery.

If you were an infantryman, you laid against the wall in a cellar, hoping to God no high explosive would land directly on the house; and you went out to attack and to fight off the vicious counter-attacks again and again. You fought with mortar and machine guns and grenade and rifle and bayonet, and called in your own artillery--all to take one miserable house. And then the Kraut counter-attacked.

If you were a tanker, you sat with your eye glued to your telescopic sight and your foot on the firing trigger--because if you looked away, you did not have time to get your eye back before the bazookas or the anti-tank guns were on you.

When it was over, it was hard to tell which were the streets and which the houses, the artillery had blasted so much. Hardly a house had a roof left and hardly a house a wall. And the dead were lying on the streets and on the ground and in the cellars and in the rubbish. Kraut soldiers and American soldiers. Civilians. The girl who tried to run out of her cellar and got fifteen steps.

A farming village lying on a gentle slope; two hundred houses, perhaps, and with two main streets. Three hundred yards long and a couple of hundred deep.

Hatten.



The Kraut was stopped at Hatten. Paratroops he had in there, cocky from a long rest behind the lines; and SS troops dead in their neat black uniforms; and crack tankers from more than one Panzer Division that had rolled over Europe, long ago. And infantry. Infantry and infantry and infantry. And he had intended to break through at Hatten and through the Forest to Haguenau, and then on to the wide plain at Strasbourg.

We moved up the night of January the 12th.

A tank battalion.

A tank battalion of the 14th Armored Division (commanded by Lt. Col. James W. Lann of Armory, Mississippi, promoted on the field of battle), minus company B, still fighting in another engagement near Drussenheim.

About 35 medium tanks, thirty tons of armor plate apiece; more than 15 light tanks, sixteen tons each, assault tanks and tanks, vehicle recovery; mortars; kitchen trucks and gas trucks and ammo trucks; half tracks and trailers; maintenance vehicles and wreckers and welders and peeps. Company A and Company C, Company D. Headquarters Company and Service Company. Battalion maintenance and Battalion medics. Tank battalion, minus.

Blackout.

If you were a driver, you saw nothing except the vagueness of the fields alongside, the dark strip of the road a few feet ahead, the deeper black of the woods. All the light in the world was the twin red black-out taillights of the vehicle in front and the indirect glow of the dials on the instrument panel. If you were a vehicle commander you stood up every now and then to check your column--it was too cold to stay standing. You could see the long line of tanks and half tracks behind you, creeping ominously along through the blackness, black-out lights just barely visible. Every now and then you heard the angry howl of a 500-horse tank engine as the driver shifted for a bad stretch of road.

The bivouac party under Lt. Tom Anderberg of Hudson, South Dakota, had gone ahead. It had found a big house for the battalion C.P. and had gone down the streets, knocking at each door and asking for rooms (Soldaten schlaffen herein? Amerikanische Soldaten?) and he found places for all the men to sleep in the Alsatian homes, and courtyards in which to park the tanks.

We moved in before dawn, the sky a faint gray instead of black and the stucco-and-timber farm houses of the village huddled together like gray stone sheep with slanted red tile roofs, just under a ridge of land and around a bend in the road.



The bivouac party was waiting for us to show us the battalion C.P. and the houses where we were to live; but the tanks stayed on the streets because we were to start the attack at 0530. The crews checked them over.

In the dim darkness you could hear a driver rev up his engine, and nearby the artillery was firing, the sharp cracks of the 105's sounding as if they were in the next street. And you could hear the whine and the empty whoom of incoming mail somewhere close enough.

It was simple. To defend, we were to attack Hatten with the infantry and drive the enemy out. The infantry would pass through us and take up defensive positions on the high ground beyond the town.

In the C.P. Col. Lann was bending over the situation map with Maj. Alton S. Kircher of Gladstone, Michigan, the exec. Lt. Paul C. Willis, the communications officer of Canton, North Carolina, was checking his radios and Capt. Solly A. Spivek of Chicago, Illinois, was setting up his map.

Hatten was due east of us then.

A single track French railway ran east and west, passed a few hundred yards south of Hatten and continued on east. Halfway between us and Hatten, also north of the railway, lay the town of Rittershoffen. Another unit was to clean out Rittershoffen.

This, then, was the situation:

We were to pass to the south of Rittershoffen, along the railroad; we were to swing north and drive into Hatten. An infantry battalion was to be with us; the infantry was to be to the south of the railroad, and we to the north.

The Kraut could see us from the high ground north of Hatten. For the land slopes gently up from the north edge of the Haguenau Forest to the crest above the Seltzbach river, and it was on that crest that the Kraut had set up his observation posts. Hatten is about half way up that gentle slope.

From the east end of Rittershoffen, too, you could see into Hatten, and you could fire into Hatten. And the Kraut held the east end of Rittershoffen with infantry and two captured American 57 mm anti-tank guns.

Capt. Harold D. Persky of St. Paul, Minnesota, commanded Company C. At least he did command it--he commanded it that morning. He was to be the attack company; and one of his platoons, commanded by Lt. Seth Sprague of Hingham, Massachusetts, was to be attached to the infantry



battalion moving south of the railroad. At least Lt. Sprague was in command of the platoon that morning. Or, what was then the platoon.

Company A, Commanded by Capt. Richard A. Tharpe of Macon, Georgia, was in support. So were the assault guns commanded by Lt. Robert C. Harper of Auburn, Nebraska. In reserve was Company D, commanded by Capt. Henry P. Tilden of Weymouth, Massachusetts.

Let us follow Lt. Sprague.

As the eastern sky turned from gray to lighter gray, directly ahead of him his tanks were standing on the narrow frozen street of a small Alsatian town. Beside him rise the steep-roofed plaster and timber houses, black in the early morning. The engine of his tank is idling easily and he is standing in the turret, hatch open, muffled in his combat suit and scarf. It is cold.

His radio is crackling softly and then the yellow warning light flashes on and he hears his call work crackling.

"Move out, Move out."

"Wilco", he says and switches to interphone. "Move out", he says to the driver. "Move out."

The tank engine roars suddenly in his ears and he does not hear the driver shift into gear. The tank lurches a little and pulls ahead. He feels its familiar grating progress as the steel tracks claw at the ice hard roads. The engine roars again and the driver shifts to third. Sprague's head is even with the windows of the houses and he can see the road better before him.

Presently he is out of town and following the road by the ghostly white fields. On both sides of the road are lines of trees, poplar and sycamore, as there always are in this country. Now he is watching for the crossroad, his line of departure. There is a frosty mist in the air. Visibility is poor.

He finds the crossroad. It is 0803.

"Crossed line one", he says, and a voice answers, "Roger".

He continues on slowly. It will be a gray, miserable day. The mist is falling on the fields, freezing on the ground. It is turning the trees of the blackwoods to his south a perfect white.

By 0850 he has moved 800 yards. Passed phase line two.

At 0913.



"Heavy enemy artillery fire", he says. "Heavy enemy artillery fire."

"Where is it."

"Don't know", he says. "Can't see, visibility poor." "All I know is it's coming in."

The enemy is on the high ground to his left; they are behind him now in Rittershoffen. He is in his tank the engine roaring hot behind him, creaking and jolting, over the frozen ground. His turret hatch is closed now. He cannot see the infantry, but he can hear the high pitched scream of the artillery, right on him, and he can see the craters sudden appear in the frozen ground ahead of him. He can feel the lift of the tank sometimes as one hits close and he can hear the shrapnel smash angrily at the armor sides.

He is headed northeast, directly towards Hatten. He is within anti-tank gun range, but he cannot see any anti-tank guns. He can make out the houses in Hatten, the slanted roofs white from mist--a small farming village lying on the slope above him.

Capt. Persky is on the air.

"Can't contact Sprague", he says. "I've lost two tanks out of his platoon." Later it turns out to be three, and fourteen men.

Lt. Francis E. Marshall of Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania, Company A, is dispatched to go into town to assist the infantry. He goes east then north. All this while the bitter fighting is going on. By now it is plain where the anti-tank guns are firing from; from the south edge of Hatten, and from much farther east so that when Marshall turns north these anti-tank guns are on his right flank.

The American artillery is not quiet. As Marshall reports the location of the guns, battalion after battalion sends out its roaring volleys from far back. Marshall can see the burst of their hits. Again and again it seems the guns are knocked out, but either the Germans send up new crews, or they send up new guns, for presently the anti-tank guns start firing again.

And all along the east the burp guns are firing on the infantry; and the Kraut artillery comes in again and again; and the mortars fall almost without stopping; and men are hit, and men are blown apart, and men lie on the frozen ground in helpless fear and hear the mortars coming. And half laugh when they miss.

So, it is not enough to say that Lt. Marshall got three of his tanks into the western edge of Hatten, that he went too far east and had to come back, that he took up a firing position.



It took him all afternoon. And all afternoon there was fighting; and all day there was dying; and it is not possible to tell everything that happened. There was a battalion of infantry there, to mention just one unit; and each of the men of that battalion could tell you his own story--and a different one--and each man was afraid in his own way, and brave in his own way, or cowardly in his own way.

Lt. Marshall got to the west edge of the town with three tanks and took up firing positions.

Meanwhile the rest of the Company A, two platoons of medium tanks, had gotten to Hatten, one to the west and one to the south, to help out the infantry in the west end of the town. The infantry had decided they could hold the town, and the tanks had gone back and brought up more infantry on the back decks.

Three tanks were left in town for the night, and six had been knocked out.

The first night in bloody Hatten had begun.

The second day came the order--"The attack will be continued". "The infantry in the west end of the town will drive to the east and clear the enemy from the town. The tanks will support."

There were the Kraut paratroopers and the Panzers, the SS and the infantry; and there were the mortars and the artillery, with the observers on the hills.

Then began the bloody day battle in the town.

The American artillery laid down preparation, an endless thundering madhouse of shells landing in Hatten. And the American infantry came out.

They tried to fight their way in the smoking, smoldering rubble; and the minute they appeared the German artillery came in. The German mortars lobbed into the streets, and the German burp guns opened up. In the bitter cold they tried to run and come to grips; and the guns cut the streets and the mortars exploded.

A German tank would move up a wreck-strewn street, climbing over the piles of rock and timbers, and an American tank would move to meet it. The German tank would stop just short of a curve and the American tank would wait, just around the corner. And so they would sit. They would try to move to get a shot without being hit--blow holes with HE through the walls of houses to fire through. And then the other would maneuver out of the way.



The two armies ground against each other.

The platoon commanders would wait for a barrage to end, duck out of their tanks, run to the infantry C.P. in the cellar of a building. Lt. Charles B. Wallace of Cincinnati, Ohio, would run with the others.

"Lieutenant", the infantry commander would say, "move your tank up here and fire on this house. Germans in there holding us up".

And Lt. Wallace would run back to his tank.

"Move up", he would say to his driver and he would move into a position to fire. The German Bazookas would open up, and the artillery start to fire again; and Wallace would fire into the house and move back from the bazookas. And the Germans in the next house would hold up the advance.

But the Germans could not move either. And the dead piled up in the streets. The dead in gray and the dead in Khaki. And the civilians caught in the town by the fighting, killed when they tried to run down the streets.

The most vicious German counter-attacks came that night, just at dusk. First, as always, the artillery. Then the quick gray shapes of the men running; and the infantry called for artillery and the machine guns chattered endlessly through the night. The flames of the guns streaked till the town was a living hell; and then the artillery began to land.

You could hear the shouts and the screams through the gunfire, and the screams of women trapped in the cellar of a burning house, set afire by white phosphorous.

Up to the town in the day had come a platoon of Company A, led by Lt. Sol Real of Brooklyn, New York, and Real had gone back. Now into this inferno at the worst time of night, came Company C tanks, led by Capt. Persky and you could hear his voice over the radio.

"Can't see anything, can't see anything", he said. "Smoke is too bad, smoke is too bad." Then as he got through the smoke and into the fire: "Christ, there are millions of them up here. They are everywhere, they are all over the place--Johnny, John, there's one now, get him, get him. . . .!" And his voice went off into abrupt silence.

Three C Company tanks were knocked out.



The German infantry did not get through. The counterattacks had been stopped. The infantry settled down to stopping the minor counterattacks that came all night to test us; and the tanks stayed to help them.

Earlier, supplies had been taken up by half-tracks, mortar half-tracks under the command of Lt. Willis E. Harding of Lincoln, Nebraska. But now the mortars were firing all day and doing guard all night, and it was too dangerous for half-tracks anyway.

Capt. Robert C. Potts of Columbia, Ohio, sent up his supplies by light tanks.

The battalion medics--18 men and two officers to care for 700 odd men--went onto the battle field in peeps to carry out the wounded, and the peeps came back with bullet holes in the windshields; and the wounded came back in half-tracks and on tanks to the aid station where Capt. William R. Eaton of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, was working.

The morning of January 15, the objective was a limited attack. We were being hurt, but so was the Kraut. We were losing tanks and men, but so was he. A prisoner of war stated that more than a hundred men in his unit were killed in a single day.

The tenseness and the fighting went on. The artillery still came in its endless scream and whoomp! And the small arms chattered endlessly; and the Krauts were in the next houses.

You would be on one side of a wall and the Krauts on the other; and you would try to lob hand grenades over to get them; and the infantry would set up a mortar and take off all the increments except one and try to lob shells over one house and onto the next. And the dead lying in the streets began to get on your nerves; and the tenseness of always looking down the sights, always waiting; and the artillery was always coming and you knew it was only a question of time before one landed on the house you were in. The fighting had reached such a vicious pitch that they tried to range in eight-inch howitzers on a single house, which is something like trying to hit a fly with a shotgun.

The fighting went on and on. That day and the next day and the next day and the next day and the next.

"Counterattacks in the Hatten were beaten off today" was the way the news dispatches read. But that did not tell of the artillery fire and what a counterattack was. That did not tell you of the infantry staff sergeant (best damned platoon leader in the Army), in combat for months, scheduled to get to the rear at 1930 to take a physical to become a second lieutenant, and how he was killed at 1530. That did not tell you of the death and screaming, the sweating in that ice cold air and the suffering.



It did not tell you of the hours and hours of endless waiting while nothing happened--hours two hundred minutes long, and days and nights too, two hundred hours, waiting, waiting, till finally you wanted something to happen.

These men could tell you--or let the official words of their citations tell you:

"Sgt. William T. Summers of Schenectady, New York, Company C, on the 18th of January at Hatten, France, at about 14:00 was maneuvering his tank to get out of range of an anti-tank gun. While so engaged he saw a light tank get hit and start to burn. Summers at once went to the light tank's aid. Upon arriving he dismounted and helped evacuate the crew. The driver of the burning tank was hurt and needed first aid. Summers gave him the necessary treatment mounted the wounded men on the back deck of his tank and rode away with him. During this entire time Sgt. Summers was entirely exposed to small arms and mortar fire falling in heavy concentration."

"On the night of the 13th of January at Hatten, France, platoon leader Lieutenant ----- was wounded. S/Sgt. Pennington P. Smith of Shreveport, Louisiana, and PFC James Barbera of Brooklyn, New York, both of Company A, dismounted from their tank into intense enemy fire and shielded the body of the Lieutenant with their own bodies while S/Sgt. Smith administered first aid. When it was necessary for someone to ride the rear deck of the tank to give the officer protection and keep him from falling off, PFC Barbera volunteered. PFC Barbera not only kept up the first aid necessary on the trip, but shielded the officer with his own body against intense small arms, mortar and artillery fire; and the lieutenant was successfully evacuated. S/Sgt. Smith returned to his platoon and assumed command, reorganized it and made a personal foot reconnaissance to discover the best route for his tanks. In the course of this reconnaissance he directed the evacuation of an infantry platoon sergeant. All this was accomplished under intense small arms and mortar fire. The success of the mission was largely due to the cool leadership of S/Sgt. Smith."

"On the 17th of January, at Hatten, France, Tc 4 John Pitcher of Altoona, Pennsylvania, and PFC Richard L. Duvall of McBain, Michigan, both of Company D, were members of the crew of a light tank that was hit by an 88 mm gun. The tank burst into flames. Under small arms fire, Tec. 4 Pitcher and PFC Duvall had dismounted from the flaming vehicle. When they saw their other two members of the crew did not come out, the two men returned to the tank and pulled the wounded gunner, who was aflame, from the tank. PFC Duvall rolled the burning body on the ground and laid on the blazing clothes to extinguish the flames. They could not evacuate the fourth man. Successful in putting out the fire, the men hailed a passing medium tank and placed the gunner on the rear deck and then laid with him under small arms fire until the



safety of an aid station was reached. The gunner has a fifty-fifth chance to live as a result of their action. These men showed unusual courage in the face of great personal danger in helping their comrades in arms."

These are the stories of three men. But they are not enough. Lt. Earl A. Allgrim of Buffalo, New York, and Sgt. William R. Fadda of San Leandro, California, both of Headquarters C Company, could tell you how they went out onto the battle field under artillery and small arms fire to evacuate a tank.

Sgt. Stephan B. Ratchuck, Jr. of Buffalo, New York, and Tec 4 Edgar Mongo of Utica, New York, both of Company B, could tell you how they walked on foot through artillery fire again and again to fix tank radios.

Lt. Eugene W. Marsack of Grosspoint, Michigan, and Pvt. Henry J. Erickson of Brooklyn, New York, both of Company D, could tell you how, on the night of the 17th of January, the Krauts hit a half-track loaded with wounded men, and how they dismounted from their tank in all that fire and hitched the half-track to the tank and towed it to safety.

Those are the stories of six more men. But the story is not told. There are a thousand stories. A story for every man. And some of the men are living. And many of them are dead. And perhaps not even all those stories would tell the story of Hatten.

The battle went on.

That day and the next day and the next day and the next.

Company B came up from Drusenheim, short of tanks from its last fight, Capt. Thomas C. Beaty of Wichita Falls, Texas, in command. This was on the 15th; and that night Lt. John Perkins of Amsterdam, New York, was killed outside his tank at Hatten. We found a letter he had written to his wife, in pencil, and not mailed. So we stamped it and sent it out.

Lt. Cullis V. Sears of Lumber City, Georgia, went up into that town that night.

By the 17th, Company A was sent back to Durrenbach. Capt. Tharpe had been wounded; and Lt. Real was back in the hospital. Company B, low on tanks to start, had lost Lt. Perkins.

Company C was low on tanks. Capt. Persky wounded; Lt. Hilbert C. Jones of Elcho, Wisconsin, wounded. Lt. Sprague missing. Lt. Sidney Hack of Brooklyn, New York, wounded. Company C had one officer left.

The Germans were still held in Hatten, though.



If you went up the gentle rolling fields south of Hatten, you could see the burnt out hulls of American tanks scattered there. You could see the German tanks there too; and if you wanted to fight your way into the streets of Hatten, you could see more burnt out wrecks there, American and German.

The Seventh Army decided to pull back. It was only a short distance, but the papers told how the Seventh Army had out-foxed von Rundstedt; how it had fought and fought and fought his counterattacks until the very last second; and then when he put all his weight behind his final punch--the Seventh had pulled back, and he was swinging at air, and the Seventh was waiting for him again as he stumbled off his balance.

We moved out on the 20th.

We moved back, to the south and the west, and left Hatten behind us. We moved out in the night, and the tanks stayed to cover the infantry; and the line of the battalion--not as long, now crawled slowly down the black roads.

Behind was Hatten, and behind was the fighting. Behind were the endless artillery barrages and the waiting. Behind were the fires and the dead. Behind was the broken German offensive.